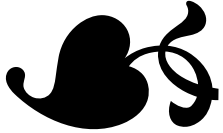




# 10 POEMS TO TEND YOUR GRIEF

*Compiled by Naila Francis*

*@thishallowedwilderness*



## Poem 1

“Your body is away from me  
But there is a window open  
from my heart to yours.  
From this window, like the moon  
I keep sending news secretly” - Rumi

### **Reflection**

There are so many ways to keep our loved ones who have died close to us, from telling their stories and sharing our favorite memories to carrying out practices that were meaningful to them and finishing projects they started. We can also choose to intentionally embody a trait of theirs we loved the most, or find connection in eating and cooking the foods they enjoyed, listening to music that moved them and spending time in the places that brought them peace and joy.

### **Invitation**

A simple way spend time with your person (people) is to write them a letter. In this poem, Rumi notes that while our loved one’s physical presence is no longer, our hearts can still communicate.

Make a cup of tea or your favorite beverage. Find a quiet, cozy spot to sit in. Maybe light a candle or some incense. And write a letter to your person. What is the news you’d like to send them? The parts of your day or life you’d like to share? Maybe you want to tell them how much you miss them or about a moment that reminded you of them. You might want to reach out for advice. Write from your heart... anything and everything you want to say. And trust that your words are finding a way to them.



## Poem 2

“The Morning Baking” by Carolyn Forché

Gramma, come back, I forgot  
How much lard for these rolls.

Think you can put yourself in the ground  
Like plain potatoes and grow in Ohio?  
I am damn sick of getting fat like you

Think you can lie through your Slovak?  
Tell filthy stories about the blood sausage?  
Pish-pish nights at the virgin in Detroit?

I blame your raising me up for my Slav tongue  
You beat me up out back, taught me to dance

I'll tell you I don't remember any kind of bread  
Your wavy loaves of flesh  
Stink through my sleep  
The stars on your silk robes

But I'm glad I'll look when I'm old  
Like a gypsy dusha hauling milk

### Reflection

Sometimes in grief, anger keeps us frozen, stuck. We think of our loved one who's died and want to rage... over their dying, over what life looks like in their absence, over what we received and didn't from them, both the good and the bad. And yet, we also think that to be angry is to perhaps betray the dead, to dishonor them. We don't allow ourselves to speak ill of them, to

honor the full range of who they were to us. And that keeps us from fully accessing our grief, and ultimately our longing and our love.

I love how this poem begins with yearning and moves almost into a rant. How dare Forché's grandma die and leave her with all these memories? And yet in the end, there is an honoring and gratitude for what she carries of her grandma, how she will live on in her.

### **Invitation**

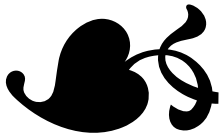
What are the words you need to say about or to your loved one that you've been afraid to say, especially if you had a complicated relationship?

What might you be denying or dismissing about your relationship to protect yourself from feeling the ache of your loss?

Try writing for 10 uninterrupted minutes without your hand leaving the page to these prompts:

I remember...

I'm glad...



## Poem 3

“To Be Held” by Linda Hogan

To be held  
by the light  
was what I wanted,  
to be a tree drinking the rain,  
no longer parched in this hot land.  
To be roots in a tunnel growing  
but also to be sheltering the inborn leaves  
and the green slide of mineral  
down the immense distances  
into infinite comfort  
and the land here, only clay,  
still contains and consumes  
the thirsty need  
the way a tree always shelters the unborn life  
waiting for the healing  
after the storm  
which has been our life.

### **Reflection**

We all long for “infinite comfort” and relief in the midst of our struggles. Yet we often deny ourselves the very care we crave...because life is too overwhelming, because we’re busy just trying to survive, because of the messages we’ve internalized about prioritizing our well-being, because we think of self-care as a luxury we can’t afford, because we do not think our grief is worthy of our own care and compassion. Here, Linda Hogan states what she wants — to be held — after being rocked by the storms of

life. She imagines what it would be like to be so nurtured, like a tree drinking the rain, with seeming trust that her healing will come.

### **Invitation**

What would it be like to care for your grief? To be held in your grief? To no longer feel parched in all the places you hold back from offering yourself nurturing and care? Or perhaps, you don't let in the love and support that's available to you. Can you pause to notice the people and spaces that are willing to make room for your grief? Can you allow yourself to be held?

Try writing for 10 uninterrupted minutes without your hand leaving the page to these prompts:

What I want is...

I am held by...



## Poem 4

“Trying to Pray” by James Wright

This time, I have left my body behind me, crying  
In its dark thorns.

Still,

There are good things in this world.

It is dusk.

It is the good darkness

Of women’s hands that touch loaves.

The spirit of a tree begins to move.

I touch leaves.

I close my eyes, and think of water.

### **Reflection**

There is so much packed into this tiny poem. Whether we are grieving a personal loss or the collective losses we are experiencing in our communities and our world, it’s easy to forget that good still exists, that beauty surrounds us.

We may also struggle with our faith or our spiritual practices. What does prayer look like from a heart that’s been ripped open? How can we trust in a higher power or in the forces of benevolence and compassion?

From the depths of our grieving, this darkness we’ve descended into may feel anything but good.

## **Invitation**

Allow yourself a moment of pause today to simply take in your surroundings. What do you notice that's beautiful? Who or what brings a smile to your lips, the sensation of warmth to your heart?

Try if you can to engage as many senses as possible:

What do you hear?

What do you see?

What can you touch, smell or taste?

What are the thoughts that feel soothing to you?

Make a list of the good things in your world. Maybe you hang it up somewhere you can see it as a reminder. Maybe you keep adding to it when a day or moment gifts you some small pleasure, something that invites you to marvel.

Consider your thoughts about darkness. Is darkness always bad? What are some of the things that represent a "good darkness" to you? What might they teach you about your grief journey?

If you are struggling to pray, consider there are countless ways to pray, to connect with an energy greater than ourselves. You can bake bread, sing, dance, play an instrument, dig your hands in the dirt, create something beautiful, or bring your reverent attention to the natural world. How might the trees, the water, the stones, the animal beings and other elements you experience speak to your grieving heart?





## Poem 5

“The Tenth Duino Elegy” by Rainer Maria Rilke

Someday, emerging at last from the violent insight,  
let me sing out jubilation and praise to assenting angels.  
Let not even one of the clearly-struck hammers of my heart  
fail to sound because of a slack, a doubtful,  
or a broken string. Let my joyfully streaming face  
make me more radiant; let my hidden weeping arise  
and blossom. How dear you will be to me then, you nights  
of anguish. Why didn't I kneel more deeply to accept you,  
inconsolable sisters, and surrendering, lose myself  
in your loosened hair. How we squander our hours of pain.  
How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration  
to see if they have an end. Though they are really  
our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen,  
one season in our inner year – not only a season  
in time – but are place and settlement, foundation and soil and home.

### Reflection

“How we squander our hours of pain. How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration to see if they have no end.” These lines from Rilke remind me of how often we want to get to the other side of our pain, to be done with suffering. To come to the end of our period of grief and mourning. And yet, what might we miss in the search only for a way out? What insights about ourselves and our lives might be hidden in these “nights of anguish”?

It is not easy to turn toward grief instead of away but it is in the embracing that we find healing, meaning, connection, the medicine to carry us forward into a life shaped by loss. Instead of hiding our weeping, what if we invited it in, made a welcoming space for the ache, the tears? Maybe if we made a home for our grief, we may eventually live our way into praising, not who

and what we've lost, but how we've deepened, opened up, become more compassionate, made new connections, learned to dance and move with this strange and bewildering guest.

### **Invitation**

Think back to a previous period of struggle or heartache in your life that you didn't think you could bear. Looking back, what lessons did you learn? What did you discover about yourself that you could only have learned through this passage? Who or what came into your life and added richness and meaning? What strength, awareness, trait or quality forged in that time can you call on now to help you navigate your grief?



## Poem 6

"oh antic God" by Lucille Clifton

oh antic God  
return to me  
my mother in her thirties  
leaned across the front porch  
the huge pillow of her breasts  
pressing against the rail  
summoning me in for bed.

I am almost the dead woman's age times two.

I can barely recall her song  
the scent of her hands  
though her wild hair scratches my dreams  
at night. return to me, oh Lord of then  
and now, my mother's calling,  
her young voice humming my name

### **Reflection**

One of the things I often hear from grieverers is "I'm afraid I'll forgot..." We're afraid we'll forget the way our loved one looked during certain moments, the sound of their voice, their scent, their gait, their gestures as they spoke, all the details that animated their being while they were alive and here with us.

While our people cannot be physically returned to us, there are ways to call them close by capturing all that we hope to remember. By speaking about them and vividly painting them into our stories and accounts. By inviting them into our dreams.

### **Invitation**

Write a list calling to mind some of the details about your person similar to those Lucille Clifton yearningly recalls. Include:

A familiar stance/posture

An everyday image of them

A moment you shared daily or with habitual frequency

Something they repeatedly called or invited you to do

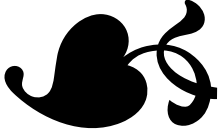
A scent you associate with them

What their voice sounded like speaking your name

Any nicknames they had for you

You may pick any memories from your list to expand upon in writing or experiment with writing a poem of your own that captures an everyday moment between you.

Write about a recurring dream you have that brings your loved one or some memory of them to you. How does the dream make you feel? If there's a message in this dream, what might it be? How does it fit with where you are on your grief journey right now?



## Poem 7

“French Chocolates” by Ellen Bass

If you have your health, you have everything  
is something that's said to cheer you up  
when you come home early and find your lover  
arched over a stranger in a scarlet thong.

Or it could be you lose your job at Happy Nails  
because you can't stop smudging the stars  
on those ten teeny American flags.

I don't begrudge you your extravagant vitality.  
May it blossom like a cherry tree. May the petals  
of your cardiovascular excellence  
and the accordion polka of your lungs  
sweeten the mornings of your loneliness.

But for the ill, for you with nerves that fire  
like a rusted-out burner on an old barbecue,  
with bones brittle as spun sugar,  
with a migraine hammering like a blacksmith

in the flaming forge of your skull,  
may you be spared from friends who say,  
God doesn't give you more than you can handle  
and ask what gifts being sick has brought you.

May they just keep their mouths shut  
and give you French chocolates and daffodils

and maybe a small, original Matisse, say, Open Window, Collioure, so you can look out at the boats floating on the dappled pink water.

## **Reflection**

“At least they’re not in pain anymore.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “They wouldn’t want you to be sad.” “Time heals all wounds.” “They’re in a better place.” “You still have your life ahead of you.”....

The list of cliches and platitudes spoken to grievers is endless. Here, Ellen Bass takes aim at “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle” — perhaps well-intentioned words but lacking in the support and care someone enduring a painful, debilitating illness needs.

So many are made uncomfortable by the messiness of what it is to be human. By emotions and circumstances that can’t be fixed, solved or tidied. In the face of another’s grief, they may reach for what feels comfortable to them instead of what’s truly supportive.

Often, as Bass indicates, what’s helpful isn’t words at all, but presence and offerings that bring comfort, pleasure and the sense of being seen.

## **Invitation**

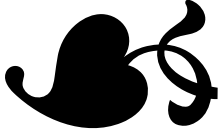
Make a list of the platitudes/cliches people have shared with you in your grief: pick one to write a letter to, or write a letter, beginning “Dear platitudes” to let those well-meaning but misguided expressions know how you really feel.

What words or acts of caring have truly made you feel seen and supported?

What would it look like to be radically honest and ask for what you need?

Try writing for 10 uninterrupted minutes without your hand leaving the page to this prompt:

Don’t cheer me up. Bring me



## Poem 8

An untitled poem by Raquel Franco

Amongst the tumble of fear and doubt  
protect your cherry blush smile,  
your baby's breath peace,  
your juniper laughter,  
and magnolia hope.

protect it. protect it. protect it.

There will be seasons  
where your branches  
don't bear leaves

and it feels like

the sky will never grant

you another sunny day

but you will reach

a reckoning.

Nothing blooms all the time.

Don't let these cold days

define you.

When hope has turned brittle

beneath these sour clouds.

I wait for the weather to change,

for the branches to bloom,

for the sky to pivot.

These winter hours have stretched

longer than a season

but I will wait. I will wait.

If you have breath

you have purpose.

When darkness comes,

remember you are resilient.  
You will find your way  
by the moonlight.  
You are an instrument,  
a testament,  
that these minutes  
can be survived.  
Sometimes,  
the wreckage  
brings you home.

### **Reflection**

Grief can feel like an endless winter. But the darkest, most painful moments won't last forever. We won't always walk with this heaviness, taste this bitterness, be swallowed by gnawing emptiness.

If we make space for our grief in our lives, instead of pushing it away, we will come to carry it differently. To find our way home to ourselves and a life that still has purpose. That doesn't mean our grief disappears, but its weather changes; bare branches begin to bloom. If we can have patience and trust in the process, as this poem invites, and protect the parts of ourselves still moved by joy and beauty, then we will find our way.

### **Invitation**

What would it mean to you to survive your grief?

What are the stories and messages you tell yourself about survival that may be keeping you stuck where you are?

What are you waiting for in this season of grief, and what is one small step you can take toward inviting that in?

Try writing for 10 uninterrupted minutes without your hand leaving the page to this prompt:

I protect...





## Poem 9

“Grief Comes with a Ladder” by Richard Solly

Friend, you ask when it will end.

All I know is that grief comes with a ladder,

though not for ascending. Try to decipher  
the language of leaves, other faces, as strange

as they appear. Its alphabet will not make sense.  
Nothing, not even birds, exists now as they should.

Never mind them. Their songs belong elsewhere.  
Your task is clear. Climb, one hand, one foot,

one after another takes you there. You ask:  
Do words help? Remember. The truest prayer

is said before you utter its words. Like the wind  
stirs the feather of a still bird. The words

themselves that lift into the air don't matter,  
only the silence and sky that summon you.

I know only this: as you reach the last rung,  
as your clothes become threadbare, as hope

becomes a whisper, a reversal happens.  
Like water, when it's displaced by weight,

rises, and is now overflowing the brim.

What took you down now takes you up.

One morning, a sign of change:  
shade under the leaves of a small tree.

### **Reflection**

Grief rearranges our world, creating chaos out of what once made sense, making the familiar foreign, leaving us so often with more questions than we have answers. We may think the journey through grief is to rise, to pull ourselves up and out of this experience. But as Richard Solly writes in this poem, the rungs of grief's ladder are not for ascending (or for moving in linear fashion through prescribed stages that lead to acceptance). This is a downward journey, a descent to touch the core of our grief and let ourselves become undone. To embrace the wildness of our sorrow and what wants to speak and move through us in its presence.

It is only after spending time here, in the depths of our loss and longing — tending our broken hearts, leaning into the wisdom of our bodies, tapping into the vitality and awareness that lives inside our grief — that we can begin to ascend. To emerge into our lives to notice what has shifted, fallen away or into place, to turn toward each small bright and hopeful thing.

### **Invitation**

Draw your ladder of grief and healing.  
Label each rung with words/phrases/images of grief and healing unique to your journey.  
Place yourself on the rung where you think you are.  
Write about where you are now or any of the steps that represent your descent and/or ascent along this ladder.

Reflect on what your truest prayer might be right now. What lives inside the words you speak?



## Poem 10

“Saint Francis and the Sow” by Galway Kinnell

The bud  
stands for all things,  
even for those things that don't flower,  
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;  
though sometimes it is necessary  
to reteach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
of the flower  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;  
as Saint Francis  
put his hand on the creased forehead  
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch  
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow  
began remembering all down her thick length,  
from the earthen snout all the way  
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,  
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine  
down through the great broken heart  
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering  
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath  
them:  
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

### **Reflection**

This has always been one of my favorite poems. I love the idea of how we flower from our own self-blessing, a concept that reminds me of how important it is to be kind and compassionate to ourselves on our grief journey. Yet many of us beat ourselves up, let self-critical talk and judgment

get the best of us. We forget that we are worthy of our own tenderness. We may not feel we are lovable at all. And we find it hard to believe there can be anything beautiful about being so broken open and vulnerable.

Here, Galway Kinnell writes of the power of an empathetic gaze or touch, a compassionate word or smile, a loving affirmation to help us reconnect with our own innate goodness and worthiness. While being witnessed in our grief has the potency to “reteach” us our own “perfect loveliness,” we can also be mindful of the words we speak to ourselves — and trade our castigations for words of blessing instead.

### **Invitation**

What might you need to reteach yourself about beauty, joy, love, abundance, anything life-giving as you move through your grief?

What are the kind and tender words you need to offer to yourself, the ways you can honor your body with more kindness?

What blessing do you need to accompany you right now?

Try writing for 10 uninterrupted minutes without your hand leaving the page to these prompts:

I bless myself with ....

Down through my great broken heart, I discover ...